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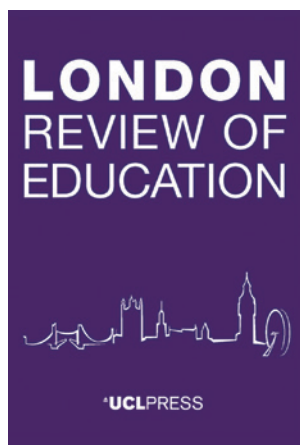
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Developing motivated adolescent readers and enhancing student voice, using action research in disadvantaged contexts

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Abstract

This action research study, drawing on participatory frameworks, investigated whether a Year 10 English class (15–16-year-olds), including struggling readers, could develop their reading self-concept and 'voice'. The research aimed to extend findings from a larger, mixed-method study, developing reading comprehension and motivation with younger adolescents, conducted in the south-east of England. Set in an urban state school in a deprived area, the present 12-week study aimed to explore, first, the impact on students of an evolving reading model, emphasizing motivation, extended reading, peer talk and use of metacognitive, multiple strategies. Second, it explored the effects of students engaging, loosely, as 'co-researchers', co-constructing knowledge with their teacher and reflecting on reading and pedagogy, in terms of 'voice' and agency. The primarily qualitative study combined open-response, student questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, written reflections on reading, and a teacher/researcher journal. Using the 'constant comparative' data-analysis method, the study found that students enhanced their reading self-concept, and developed their 'voice'. However, unpredictably, reading confidence was threatened by students' internalized discourses about performativity and feelings of anxiety and lack of agency, attributed to 'high-stakes' public examinations nearly two years away.

Keywords: struggling readers, reading self-concept, reading comprehension, student voice, action research, disadvantaged students

Introduction

Being a competent reader is essential to academic success in school and is highly related to future employment, annual earnings, life opportunities and human flourishing (for example, OECD, 2013). The latest PISA assessment (OECD, 2019) indicates that 23 per cent of 15-year-olds in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have inadequate reading literacy, a figure repeated in other European studies of reading (EACEA, 2011). In England, there is a persistent, 12 per cent average gap in attainment between students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including a disproportionate number of struggling readers, and other students, as measured by General Certificate of School Examinations (GCSEs) at 16 years (EEF, 2018). There is an urgent need to address this inequity, developing the reading of doubly disadvantaged students, at risk of being failed by the education system. ('Struggling readers' are defined here as having a reading age of 1+ year(s) below their chronological age.)

Reading comprehension of whole texts is complex and multifaceted, involving 'linguistic and cognitive processes, which interact during reading as the reader tries to extract meaning from written text' (EACEA, 2011: 36). Readers must create a mental model of a text (Kintsch, 1998), using vocabulary knowledge and making inferences, requiring them to apply different types of knowledge and make connections across the text to create meaning (Oakhill and Cain, 2012; Oakhill *et al.*, 2015). Readers must also monitor their comprehension and be able to select from a range of strategies to resolve 'blocks' (*ibid.*). Considerable research suggests best pedagogy to develop adolescent struggling readers' comprehension, including teaching metacognitive comprehension strategies explicitly and peer collaboration (Brooks, 2016; EACEA, 2011; IRA, 2007; see Scammacca *et al.*, 2015 for a review). Additionally, readers must experience reading a large number of whole texts, as this repeated practice develops their fluency, vocabulary, general knowledge and inference abilities (Stanovich, 1986; Mol and Bus, 2011). 'Good readers' typically gain such experience by reading for pleasure, independently (Cremin *et al.*, 2014), whereas adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds, including struggling readers, are less likely to do this (Clark and Akerman, 2006), creating a gap in reading experience and skills. However, given encouragement to read for pleasure, struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds can significantly develop their comprehension, for example, in one US study, by simply choosing 15 new books to keep over the summer vacation, when the reading gap typically increases (Allington *et al.*, 2010).

All the above studies indicate the importance of motivation in enhancing reading skills, defined as 'the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading' (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000: 405; see Morgan and Fuchs, 2007 for a review on the reciprocal relation between motivation and comprehension skills). 'Good readers', who read for pleasure independently, typically have a stronger 'drive for coherence' (Van den Broek, 1997), or persistence to reach the end of the book, making it meaningful, thereby developing their skills (Taboada *et al.*, 2009). Reading achievement also contributes to developing positive reading self-concept, a component of motivation: 'an individual's perceptions of competence in performing reading tasks' (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014: 23), or being a 'confident' reader (*ibid.*: 29), capable of overcoming comprehension challenges. Indeed, these authors found a reciprocal relation between reading skill and reading self-concept in younger adolescents (*ibid.*). Struggling readers, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, frequently experience the opposite cycle to 'good readers' – repeated failures in comprehension contribute to a negative reading self-concept and attitude to reading, associated with feelings of anxiety (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000). This indicates the importance of secondary teachers of English using an engaging and supportive pedagogy to enable struggling readers to develop not only their reading skills, but also their enjoyment, motivation and reading self-concept. For example, reading in small peer groups, while being guided to use strategies, motivates adolescent struggling readers, supporting comprehension and independence (Garbe *et al.*, 2009; Okkinga *et al.*, 2018). Students can ask questions, make inferences and connections in a trusting space, monitoring comprehension, negotiating meaning and, crucially, enjoying reading with peers (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020). Dialogic whole-class talk during reading can, similarly, develop comprehension and motivated reading (for example, Applebee *et al.*, 2003; Soter *et al.*, 2008).

Reading and accountability

Schools in England are judged on GCSE performance at 16 years, particularly in English and mathematics. While the latest Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2019: 10) framework declares an intention to move away from its long-standing focus on examination results, reading remains a key measure of school performance, evaluating whether 'a rigorous approach to teaching develops learners' confidence and enjoyment in reading'. The new language of reading 'confidence' and 'enjoyment' pleasingly echoes the literature, but is undercut by the pervasive culture of accountability, to which Ofsted clearly contributes. This typically leads to a 'narrowing of the curriculum', 'teaching to the test' and 'test anxiety' (Brill *et al.*, 2018: 10; Biesta, 2010), with students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with low prior attainment most likely to feel such pressure (Goodman and Burton, 2012). Student 'voice' is either inhibited by such performative cultures (Fielding and Moss, 2010) or, worse, co-opted to 'legitimate neo-liberal marketisation of education' (Arnot and Reay, 2007: 311).

The current GCSEs in English (for example, AQA, 2015) have no coursework, comprise linear, timed examinations, and require heavy memorization of a large number of literary texts, contrasting with previous assessment frameworks (for example, AQA, 2009). Examinations also require students to comprehend at speed, compare and analyse, 'unseen', including nineteenth-century, challenging extracts with archaic vocabulary. Former, differentiated 'Foundation' papers in GCSE English (for example, *ibid.*), targeted at weaker readers, with extracts from modern, less linguistically challenging texts and coursework, have been removed. The current assessment modes are particularly challenging for struggling readers, who have typically poor memory and slower processing speeds (Oakhill *et al.*, 2015). The accountability culture has also, arguably, led to a distortion of the secondary reading curriculum from 11 years, with schools pressurized into focusing on the above analytical writing skills needed for GCSE, often on extracts or abridged, nineteenth-century novels (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020). Thus, struggling readers of 14–15 years may enter their GCSE years with little experience of reading and engaging with whole modern novels, supporting their comprehension development and reading self-concept.

A recent, mixed-method study (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020; Westbrook *et al.*, 2019), conducted by Julia (second author of this paper) with colleagues, in which Tara (first author and Head of English) was a participant, investigated whether struggling readers' comprehension and motivation could be enhanced by radically changing reading practices in Year 8 English lessons (12–13 years, $n=413$). Its 'Faster Read' model aimed to increase the amount of pleasurable, whole-text reading of modern, challenging texts, while teaching students comprehension strategies. Classes read two books 'back-to-back' in a term; teachers, informed by a theorized development programme, prioritized dialogic discussion, questioning and meaning making across whole texts, including in small groups, not written analysis of extracts. This enabled struggling readers to make an average of 16 months' progress in comprehension in 12 weeks, on standardized tests, and to enhance their motivation and engagement with reading (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020; Westbrook *et al.*, 2019).

Context

Four years later, Tara still uses the 'Faster Read' model at Key Stage 3 (11–14 years), informed by the project's professional development and her experience of teaching in this way (Korthagen, 2010), transforming her pedagogy. Enthused by engagement in

research, Tara started a master's in education and continued to research reading in her school, supervised by Julia. As Head of English in a deprived area, Tara wanted to unite two interests: supporting older students in disadvantaged contexts and struggling readers, studying for GCSEs, and enabling students to develop their 'voice'. Voice is a contested term (see Bragg, 2010, for a review), but it is used here as students' ability to actively shape pedagogy, by working as dialogic partners with their teacher in action research (Fielding and Moss, 2010). Aiming to enact 'voice', Tara chose action research with participatory methods to maximize opportunities for students to contribute (Nind, 2014). Therefore, this study can be seen as a Bakhtinian response (Bakhtin, 1981) to the earlier, larger-scale project – part of a chain of dialogues the two authors have had about reading and practitioner research for several years as we continue to deepen understanding in our different contexts, and with teacher/researcher colleagues in our communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The study was conducted in an urban state school, Bridgehouse (anonymized name), in south-east England, with nine hundred students on roll. The majority of students live on the local estate, an area of deprivation. The target class was broadly representative of the school population: a mixed-sex, mixed-ability, Year 10 class (14–15 years old): 53 per cent of students receive the pupil premium, a proxy for social disadvantage; 47 per cent of students are on the register for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), in both cases, twice or higher than the national average. Additionally, 53 per cent of the class have reading ages of 1+ year(s) below their chronological age.

The study sought to investigate whether key elements of the earlier research on reading with younger adolescents, cited above, could be used to enhance the reading self-concept and attitudes to reading of Year 10 students, including struggling readers. Reading self-concept was defined to students as perception of their competence, also using the simpler phrase, 'reading confidence' (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014). GCSE English examinations have an assumed reading age of 15–16 years, yet the lowest student reading age in this class was 9 years, so the study focused on intensive reading, while developing students' comprehension strategies, reading self-concept and motivation to 'have a go' at tackling unfamiliar vocabulary and texts linguistically higher than their current reading level. Importantly, most new vocabulary is learned incidentally, through reading (Cunningham, 2005; Nagy and Scott, 2000), but struggling readers have weaknesses in inferring meaning from context (*ibid.*). Therefore, the study focused on developing students' inference skills for vocabulary, and their motivation to persist.

The research questions were:

1. To what extent can action research support students in developing their reading self-concept?
2. What are any impacts of conducting action research, using participatory methods:
 - a) for students, for example, in terms of voice?
 - b) for the teacher and pedagogy?

Action research

Action research is an organic, evolving form of research, enabling practices to be experimented with and adapted in iterative cycles of action, evaluation and reflection (Heron and Reason, 2008). It is concerned with improving practice and with broader issues of social justice, aiming to develop participants' critical understanding and authentic participation (*ibid.*; Kemmis, 2006). The 12-week study used participatory methods, drawing on Nind's (2014) concept of inclusive and collaborative forms

of action research. Tara acknowledges that she chose the research focus and steered the first cycle of intervention, starting with a reading approach informed by: her participation in prior research explored above; the literature review; and her professional understanding of what her students found challenging and needed to develop to become successful readers. However, students' perspectives informed all stages of the action research, adapting the pedagogy and generating a new model.

Tara recognizes the complexity of her researcher position, with inherent teacher–student power relationships and the ethical dangers of slipping into 'Dracula as action researcher', appropriating or ventriloquizing students' voices (Couture, 1994: 127; Bakhtin, 1981). Therefore, the project sought to create a 'dialogic space' for participation and, indeed, for reading (Sutherland, 2015: 54; Smith *et al.*, 2010), with students continuously reflecting, orally and in writing. Tara also used a research journal to support reflexivity, layering reflections (Janesick, 1999) and recording observations of critical incidents in lessons, particularly when listening to groups reading and responding to texts.

The other research methods enabled cycles of reflection and evaluation: three questionnaires were given to the 17 students over time, with open questions, enabling deeper responses. The first and third questionnaires had 17 responses, the second, 15 responses. These were interleaved with two follow-up, semi-structured group interviews (six students, representative of the class), to elicit students' perspectives. All instruments were piloted with non-participating students and critical friends, and amended.

Given the students' vulnerability, stage in school and inherent teacher–student power relationships, care was taken to ensure their rights, protection from harm, right to withdraw and anonymity at every stage of the research, including using an inclusive, participatory design (BERA, 2018). Approval was gained from the university's Social Science and Arts Cross School Ethics Committee. Meetings to discuss the project with parents and students, supported by accessibly phrased information sheets and consent forms, enabled written informed consent, with findings being presented after the project (*ibid.*). The elements of the action research intervention were research-informed, constituting best practice according to existing evidence, maximizing potential benefit for students studying for GCSEs (*ibid.*).

Action research cycles

Each of the three main action research cycles began with a reconnaissance phase, informed by the literature and by evaluating data collected so far, enabling collective reflection on the action research model being trialled. While Tara intended a participatory framework from the start, it is clear that this process developed greatly over time: cycles shifted from being primarily teacher-led to being student-led, with Cycle 3 being wholly inspired by students. Cycle 1 aimed to teach students how to be active, metacognitive readers, monitoring their comprehension and identifying where they stopped understanding, why and how to address this. Metacognition was introduced as a three-stage process of planning, monitoring and evaluating (for example, Mason, 2013). However, informed by students' feedback that the approach was too mechanistic but that self-monitoring was helpful, Cycle 2 became more flexible. Students practised comprehension strategies more flexibly in whole-class and small-group reading: questioning, clarifying, predicting, recapping, making whole-text connections and developing inference (word- and text-level).

Cycle 3 was entirely driven by students' desire to spend a large proportion of lesson time in reading groups, reading aloud or silently, exploring the set text, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 2002), monitoring comprehension jointly, selecting strategies when needed, and interpreting and evaluating both the novel and the strategies. Throughout the action research, Tara adapted strategies from literature, for example, explicitly applying text-, self- and world-knowledge for inference from Sutherland *et al.* (2020), and 'Think before, while, after', 'six questions' and the 'super six' strategies from Mason (2013).

Methods of data analysis

The qualitative data (open-survey questions, journals and interviews) were analysed using the constant comparative approach (Thomas, 2013), identifying inductive codes; clustering these into themes: metacognition, strategies, vocabulary, reading groups and examinations; and triangulating these with the trends identified in the questionnaire data. The analysis also drew on literature exploring metaphor (for example, Geary, 2012) to support interpretative analysis. Indicators of students' reading self-concept were based on self-report and triangulated with other evidence: students' group and class discussion, behaviour and attitudes during tasks, for example, ability to persist with reading, applying strategies.

Findings and discussion

Data analysis suggested that the emergent action research model, focusing on metacognitive reading with strategies, particularly when exploring the text in peer reading groups, had developed students' reading self-concept, to differing degrees. In the final questionnaire, students were asked to rate any changes in 'confidence in reading' on a seven-point scale with a mid-point of 'No change': all 17 students reported that their confidence had increased; 6 selected 'Much more', 11 'A bit more'; none selected 'Greatly increased'. Interviews confirmed this:

I feel much more confident, because we've read *Jekyll and Hyde* since then ... and the words are really complicated ... And because we read it with partners as well, and you didn't read it to us, I've got faster and I don't start all over again [that is, from the beginning of sentences/paragraphs, through lack of comprehension]. (Tom)

However, student feedback, open-questionnaire responses and interviews suggested that some students, particularly the weakest readers, found the initial emphasis on metacognition 'confusing' and challenging:

It [metacognition] is useful, but it isn't the easiest thing to do with different texts, especially if they are new. (Amy)

Tara also observed the same students' seeming lack of confidence and skills in tackling hard texts:

Asked Amy what was happening in the text, she said, 'I don't have a clue!' Many students say, 'I don't get it'. But when I asked them about the text, they did – (low self-concept?) (Research Journal)

Interestingly, students' first response to Tara's questions about a text was typically to deny any comprehension. They clearly had an ingrained, negative reading

self-concept and a fear of humiliation by giving the 'wrong answer', as further questioning elicited considerable understanding, noted above. As Tara gathered data and discussed students' perspectives on the reading model, she realized that the Cycle 1 metacognitive framework was over-complicated:

It's [metacognition's] more confusing ... It just helps you to plan, but then we get confused. And then you have to think about so many things in your head. (Sarah)

Sarah's confusion here clearly indicates that she needed a more accessible approach to support her monitoring of comprehension, and more time to internalize and be able to use the model. However, paradoxically, Sarah is demonstrating an ability to reflect, metacognitively, on the complexity of comprehension, rightly noting that it requires readers to use multiple processes simultaneously (Oakhill *et al.*, 2015).

Collaborative reading

Significantly, all students reported in questionnaires and orally, that collaborative reading in pairs or small groups was the 'most helpful' approach for developing their reading skills and confidence. They also highly valued the strategies, particularly asking questions, visualizing and using emojis to identify the emotion they experienced, as readers, at different points in the text, which they used to identify tone, a sophisticated aspect of interpretation. This was reinforced in interviews:

[I feel] more confident because if I don't understand an extract, I have things to fall back on. Like with the drawings and the six questions ... so if I don't understand it, I can just reread it again, using them ... and [Sally] gives me ideas to, like, add in or that I hadn't thought of. (Lee)

If I don't understand something, you can, like, ask your partner and they'll help you with things you don't understand, and you can say new ideas. (Adam)

I think [group reading] has given me more confidence, and with reading aloud in a lesson as well ... because ... you're more used to reading fluently, and if you're, like, reading in a group, you can read more faster and understand the text. (Joe)

Joe's comment that group reading aloud has increased his speed and fluency, which he links to *understanding* the text, is particularly perceptive, as these elements are critical to comprehension and all three can be fostered by expressive reading aloud (Westbrook *et al.*, 2019). Tara had initially planned to use whole-class reading, believing this would keep all students comprehending the challenging text(s). However, whole-class reading is often fragmented and slow, with students stumbling over each word and meaning being lost (*ibid.*). Students' insightful explanations enabled Tara to refocus the pedagogy in action research Cycle 3 on the approaches they found most helpful.

Interestingly, there was a striking contrast between students' claims not to be able to use a metacognitive approach early in the project when working independently or as a class, and Tara's observations of *groups* spontaneously demonstrating such meta-awareness. This was a turning point in the action research: Tara was forced to question how metacognition had been introduced, overemphasizing the importance of students *individually* experimenting with strategies and using an excessively technical approach. Although guided reading and group work are known to be effective for

developing metacognitive reading (for example, Okkinga *et al.*, 2018), and Tara typically builds a culture of group work in her classes, pedagogy in this Year 10 class had been distorted. This was partly because of the literature conceptualizing metacognition as an individual process (for example, Mason, 2013), and Tara's knowledge that students would sit GCSE examinations individually. Listening to students' voices forced Tara to reflect on the Vygotskian, sociocultural theories underpinning group discussion: high-quality, 'tentative, speculative' talk about text (Sutherland, 2015: 58; Soter *et al.*, 2008) mediates learning, becoming internalized by students, making those ways of thinking available for individual use, including in examinations. Students demonstrated that they needed space to find their own ways to develop the metacognitive, self-monitoring process, and they unanimously found this in collaborative, pair and group reading and discussion, as Tara frequently observed:

Lovely moment – Toni: 'What are you thinking here? I'm thinking about ...'
Students want to discuss. Great modelling of her thought process.
(Research Journal)

The second half of the action research involved reading the challenging, nineteenth-century 'set' text, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson, 2002; henceforth, *Jekyll and Hyde*). Tara had planned to use whole-class, teacher-led reading and discussion, interspersed with individual reading, exploring what students had understood and evaluating which strategies were helpful. However, responding to student voices, in the spirit of Fielding and Moss's (2010) radical pedagogy, Cycle 3 was changed, enabling students to complete most of the reading in groups, and establishing a culture of collaborative reading. Students also contributed to decisions about groupings, based on friendship, but ensuring groups had mixed reading ages, and being balanced to achieve trust and rapport. Students began reading collaboratively and productively almost immediately, as Tara noted in her Research Journal:

Group work again good. Reading chapter 4 (Murder Case). TW/AB able to stop and monitor as they read. Far more spontaneous questions happening. LS very supportive of JC. LR leading group really well.

At this point in the action research, Tara's role in the classroom shifted to being a facilitator, with students leading their own expressive reading, pace, use of strategies and exploration of the text, mainly autonomously, interspersed with class discussion. Use of collaborative reading to support comprehension was particularly notable in the way the students tackled the final chapter of the text. This is complex, being narrated by the protagonist, Jekyll, in the form of a letter, left behind after his death. Written in dense prose, with multiple subordinate clauses, it also has a large amount of unfamiliar, archaic vocabulary. However, it was the first time Tara had seen GCSE students in her school read and understand this chapter independently, especially in a class where many students have low reading ages:

Reading final chapter. A move away from explicit metacognitive reading strategies. Most students now – in their reading groups – monitor and pause to discuss ... Interesting to see how some ask questions now. Vocab. is still challenging, but they do skip over big/unknown words. Modelling 'stopping and pausing' has really helped. (Research Journal)

By this stage, most students had internalized strategies and were reading in the way that 'good' readers do, spontaneously asking a range of probing and clarifying authentic

questions and having the confidence to know when they needed to understand an unknown word and when they could 'get the gist' and read on (Oakhill *et al.*, 2015). Group discussions were rich and purposeful, with students valuing discussion. Students' shared ownership of their reading was also notable (Fielding and Moss, 2010), paralleled by Cycle 3 becoming more participatory, with an authentic common goal (Freire, 1996).

Evidence of the benefits of group reading in developing students' skills and confidence in tackling challenging texts independently was seen late in the project, when students were given practice extracts to read, as noted in Tara's Research Journal:

Week off from reading. Atmosphere is silent. Short extract. ... Even a change in posture → [Students] 'actively' reading, looking closely, notes, etc. Joe – initially sat, hand in pocket. Then, as he began, sits up and looks closely. Asks if he can 'Do the 6 questions [strategy]' without prompting.

The purposeful atmosphere was palpable: all students intensely concentrated and exhibited confidence that they *could*, with effort, comprehend the extract on their own – the essence of reading self-concept (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014). The students with the lowest reading ages benefited particularly from working with their peers, as evidenced, for example, by Jodie:

When we read it, then talk about it after reading a hard paragraph, I feel so much more confident because I start to picture it and it becomes a lot easier. (Questionnaire 3)

The impact of high-stakes examinations

Despite finding that the action research had considerably enhanced students' reading self-concept, this was threatened by a worrying, unpredicted thread woven through the data of students expressing intense feelings of examination anxiety. Across the questionnaires, this was mainly implicit: inductive codes, for example, 'analysis', showed that students often discussed examination criteria – the need 'to analyse' texts read – despite not being asked explicitly about this. Analysis is a key aspect of the GCSE assessment criteria, but it was deliberately not emphasized in this project as the focus was on comprehension and reading self-concept. Both are necessary preconditions of analysis: indeed, GCSE examiners recognize that students being 'well-drilled' in language analysis is often at the expense of sophisticated, whole-text interpretation (AQA, 2018: 5). Significantly, it was in the dialogic group interviews that students spontaneously raised their examination anxiety, linking this to their confidence and ability to perform well in reading:

Tara: So how do you feel when you have a text and you've never seen it before?

Lee: In an exam when you have to read ... a huge [unseen] text you sort of, like, skim through it, instead of actually reading it properly.

Felicity: Yeah, in an exam it's much more overwhelming – because you know you have so many things to do. But like, in a lesson ... you trust yourself, because you have the time to analyse every aspect of what you're reading.

Importantly, these students were the strongest readers in the class, yet even they immediately linked reading a new text with examinations, rather than addressing the

open question asked. Felicity's insight that she can 'trust' herself as a reader, if given sufficient time for reading, is critical, highlighting that timed conditions erode her self-concept, inhibiting her comprehension (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014). Other students' language similarly echoed with metaphors of time, ticking bombs or unspecified masses, threatening to overwhelm them:

Joe: you've got that great big clock and you've been taught to spend a certain amount of time on each question ...

Lee: With new extracts and stuff like that, we get enough pressure trying to keep up and trying to understand it all. But with the extra pressure of the exam system ... it like, makes a bomb go off!

Felicity: It's overwhelming!

Toni: ... It's stressful.

Lee: That little nag in the back of our heads ...

Amy: It's just, the pressure – it builds all the time ... It's little at first, and then with the exams it just goes up and then it builds like, a massive pile!

Tara: Do you feel that way, too?

Joe: It's our life.

The students' metaphorical language shows the high level of anxiety that reading decontextualized extracts, including nineteenth-century ones, in timed examinations produces. This illustrates the effects that performative cultures can have, particularly on struggling readers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Biesta, 2010; Goodman and Burton, 2012). Time's personification as 'That little nag in the back of our heads' (Lee) is a Foucauldian image of oppressive educational discourses being internalized, with students judging and surveilling themselves by the performative criteria that judge them. And this pressure is inescapable: 'It's our life' (Joe).

Impacts of the action research: Reading self-concept and 'voice'

The study aimed to investigate an area overlooked in policy and, largely, in research on older, adolescent, struggling readers – students' reading self-concept – their belief that they are skilful readers, capable of, and motivated to tackle, reading challenges (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014). It also aimed to explore any impacts of using a participatory form of action research on students, teacher and practice (discussed below). In terms of Research Question 1 ('To what extent can action research support students in developing reading self-concept?'), the study demonstrates that reported and observed self-concept appeared to increase, namely: confidence, persistence and ability to use strategies, particularly questioning, inferring, making connections and monitoring comprehension, reinforcing our earlier study with younger adolescents. Students all particularly related their development as individuals to working in trusting, dialogic reading groups – being given time to read aloud and use exploratory talk to jointly comprehend and explore texts, which they found useful and engaging, again, supporting the literature (for example, Sutherland, 2006, 2015; Soter *et al.*, 2008). Significantly, this interactive reading pedagogy is not standard practice in Year 10 classes with struggling readers because of pressures to 'teach to the test' (Brill *et al.*, 2018), focusing instead on writing rather mechanical 'PEEZ' paragraphs

(Point–Evidence–Explain–Zoom). However, unexpectedly, students' reading self-concept appeared threatened by intense examination anxiety and a pervasive discourse of performativity that dominated students' attitudes to reading, one-and-a-half years before their GCSEs, eroding the likelihood that they would perform at their best in class or examinations (for example, Biesta, 2010).

In addressing Research Question 2a ('What are any impacts of conducting action research for students?'), findings suggested that students were enabled, to an extent, to develop their voice (Fielding and Moss, 2010) in shaping their pedagogy and collaborating with their teacher, in the spirit of transformative forms of action research (for example, Kemmis, 2006). They could also articulate their anxieties about GCSE examinations, making their teacher more sensitive to addressing affective aspects of learning, especially with these vulnerable adolescents. Students had, arguably, gained a critical awareness of broader educational structures and discourses, as advocated by action research (*ibid.*), although they were still heavily constrained by these.

Addressing Research Question 2b ('What are any impacts of conducting action research for the teacher and pedagogy?'), findings showed that Tara's understanding of how to support GCSE struggling readers to develop positive reading self-concept, while comprehending complex texts, deepened, and her practice was greatly enhanced, through valuing students' knowledge and suggestions (Heron and Reason, 2008). She moved from a mechanical approach – 'teaching metacognitive strategies' – to enabling students to become metacognitive readers, flexibly using a range of comprehension strategies, while immersed in motivated reading with peers. Such knowledgeable reading pedagogy for adolescent struggling readers is relatively rare (Compton *et al.*, 2014).

Conclusions

This is a small action research project in a situated context, but findings on the imperative of addressing the *motivational* aspects of reading with adolescent struggling readers, while also developing comprehension using extended texts, endorse our larger-scale study (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020). This focus on reading motivation for vulnerable adolescents is underemphasized in current research (Conradi *et al.*, 2014) and in policy, as represented by GCSE English content and assessment (for example, AQA, 2015). The limitations of action research include the difficulty of balancing the teacher/researcher role and power relationships, including students seeking teacher approval in responses (Smith *et al.*, 2010). The unexpected finding about examination anxiety raises uncomfortable ethical issues about whether purportedly critical forms of action research may enhance consciousness of oppression without ability to offer a resolution (Smith *et al.*, 2010). However, students' desire to spontaneously voice such intense feelings, and be listened to, is a unique benefit of participatory forms of action research. The practitioner-researcher does not leave the site, clutching their data, but continues to work alongside, support and strengthen student-participants in a new cycle, albeit within the constraints of a destructive assessment system.

Action research, as originally conceptualized, is radical, throwing down a gauntlet to challenge conventional research paradigms in its aim to move beyond hierarchical binaries: Aristotle's *theoria/praxis*; *mind/body*; *researcher/researched* (for example, Heron and Reason, 2008). It aims to slip between cycles of action, theory and reflection to generate new theory and enhance educational practice. It should always be guided by its ultimate aim – greater social justice and opportunity for its participants, frequently marginalized, to have a voice, collaborate and extend

their collective thinking in the process of trying to improve their own education or, indeed, as a student, Joe, indicated above, their '*lives*' (Freire, 1996). So, the best way of judging action research is to ask: has it improved anything and generated, for participants and the research community, not inert knowledge, but new 'ways of knowing' – encompassing practical, experiential, affective and propositional forms (Heron and Reason, 2008: 366)? The students in this study have increased their reading self-concept, motivation and ability to tackle challenging reading, especially of whole texts (Retelsdorf *et al.*, 2014). Beyond that, students have also discovered that reading with peers, asking questions and teasing out meanings, is pleasurable and supports understanding. Given the National Literacy Trust's (NLT, 2020) annual survey, indicating that only 26 per cent of young people, disproportionately from *advantaged* groups, read for pleasure in England each day; and strong evidence that motivated readers enhance their comprehension (Morgan and Fuchs, 2007), this is an important finding, reinforcing our earlier research.

Struggling readers have also developed their critical understanding of their position in the education system (Freire, 1996). They have been allowed to express their experiential understanding – their frustration and critique – of an assessment framework that many feel they cannot succeed in. Despite finding collaborative ways to build their reading self-concept, this is still threatened by examination time pressures; the focus on decontextualized, nineteenth-century extracts; and 'closed book' text memorization of a large volume of literature and language (AQA, 2015). This is not because these students cannot comprehend or enjoy a rich, Victorian novel, as they showed when reading *Jekyll and Hyde*, but because the assessment mode is ill-conceived – and inequitable. Findings from our two studies suggest that GCSE English and a culture of performativity may be distorting teachers' reading practices with younger, 11–14-year-old, students (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020), and, in this present study, with older students of 15–16 years. This suggests the need to radically reconceptualize GCSE English frameworks to enable struggling readers to engage in whole-text reading and be given sufficient time to analyse contextualized texts in examinations. Diversifying assessment modes would support this, reintroducing written and, indeed, oral coursework (exploratory talk about texts), as in former GCSE English literature specifications (for example, AQA, 2009), which were based on strong research evidence (for example, Soter *et al.*, 2008).

Finally, we address: what lasting impact has action research had on both teacher and practice? It has developed Tara's epistemology, demonstrating the imperative of valuing students' voices and knowledge, taking risks with pedagogy, drawing on theoretical literature (for example, Fielding and Moss, 2010; Compton *et al.*, 2014) and raising teacher aspirations of students in disadvantaged contexts (Reay, 2006). Students' reflections and deep understanding of their learning showed how much they wanted to succeed, and to work collaboratively to design ways to improve their reading. This is not a narrative often heard about struggling readers from disadvantaged backgrounds (Nind, 2014). Tara began the project thinking that metacognition was the most important element to support students' reading self-concept and comprehension, but students challenged this, arguing that group reading and discussion were what mattered. The students became key stakeholders in the action research design and by listening to their voices, they too became empowered, to an extent, realizing their capabilities (Smith *et al.*, 2010). Tara also now recognizes that she was as subject to performative discourses as the students: she unwittingly began the project with the 'endgame' of performance in mind, as the GCSE examinations dominated the initial action research design (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). However, a risk-taking classroom culture

enabled students to guide Tara to a more collaborative pedagogy, which they knew worked best for their reading – and helped her to develop her voice and agency (*ibid.*).

Above all, the students have transformed Tara's ways of knowing, showing how it feels to be an adolescent 'struggling reader' in our performative education system, who may have struggled with reading since they entered school at 4 years old, facing those linear, timed, extract-based examinations at 16. Tara continues to place group reading and discussion at the centre of English lessons, giving students the experience of reading rich, whole texts, teaching them strategies and encouraging reflection as they read. She also continues to use action research cycles to improve practice. But most of all, Tara preserves space, while wading through the dense GCSE syllabus, to listen to students' voices – and to try to act on them.

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